GOD WANTS A FULL HOUSE
World Communion Sunday
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Psalm 133
Luke 14:15–24

"Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."
Luke 15:23 (NRSV)

Who is the one whom Christians confess to be the way, the truth, and the life?
According to the New Testament, he is the expression of God's love
not just for Christian believers but for all humanity. . . .
He came not to condemn, defeat, or lord it over those who rejected him
but to give his life for them. . . . God raised him from the dead
and made him to be the crucified and risen Lord over all . . .
not just Lord over the church or Lord in the hearts of believers,
but the risen Lord who continues his healing, reconciling, liberating,
saving work everywhere in the world. Even where he is not yet known,
acknowledged, and served; even before Christians get there to tell about him.

Shirley C. Guthrie Jr.
Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World

On a cold and overcast November afternoon a dozen years ago, I was sitting in the chancel in Holy Name Cathedral near the high altar. It was an honor to be there, for which I will always be grateful. Joan Brown Campbell, then General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, and I were the only two Protestants invited to be part of the funeral mass for Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, beloved archbishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chicago. It was a remarkable gesture of ecumenism and generous hospitality that reflected Cardinal Bernardin's own wonderful spirit. He was a good friend of this church: preached here on two occasions, ate lunch with our officers. (Francis Cardinal George has done the same thing.) Cardinal Bernardin was an ecumenist globally but also locally. One time the officers of this church were attending a retreat at Techny, a Roman Catholic retreat and study center. After the evening session we assembled in a large, nicely appointed social room for refreshments and conversation. At our end of the room

there was a spread of cheeses, vegetables and dip, soft drinks and fruit juices. At the other end of the room there was a group of Roman Catholic priests, also on break from a retreat. Cardinal Bernardin, in shirtsleeves, was among them. They also had a spread of cheeses, vegetables and dips. Their drink selection was, shall I say, a little more robust than ours. Cardinal Bernardin recognized us, motioned to me. We chatted, and he suggested that perhaps the Presbyterian leaders might appreciate sharing in the priests' drink possibilities. So we did, happily— Presbyterian elders and Roman Catholic priests mixing it up, one ecumenical reception and, for me, an unforgettable gesture of generous, ecumenical hospitality.

And so I was deeply honored to be in the chancel of Holy Name Cathedral, surrounded by Roman Catholic clergy, on the occasion of Cardinal Bernardin's funeral mass. After the music and readings, the eulogies and Monsignor Ken Velo's wonderful homily, we came, in the liturgy, to the Eucharist. It was, needless to say, an elaborate and beautiful expression of the Roman church's long history, carried out with elegance. When it came time for the distribution of the elements, the bread and wine, body and blood, the guests, seated around the chancel, were served by several bishops and cardinals: Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles was the server for our section. When he came to Joan Brown Campbell and me, I wondered what would happen. Our eyes met briefly. I am sure he did not know me. But he did know I was not a member of his church. "The body of Christ," he said, "the blood of Christ." And he passed us by. I mean no criticism of him. It would have been impossible under the circumstances for him to do anything different. I was not angry; I was sad. I was also dismayed that the sacrament became, and remains, a symbol and a means of division, separation. I've been thinking about it ever since: grateful for the privilege of being present but struck with the irony that the mass that celebrated a remarkable leader and ecumenist excluded me.

I'm offended whenever the Sacrament of Communion becomes a weapon to punish and exclude rather than reconcile and include; when Roman Catholic politicians, Democrat and Republican, for instance, are threatened and barred from the sacrament for differing from the church's position on abortion, stem cell research, gay marriage—issues about which faithful Christians differ. I'm offended whenever Jesus' table becomes a barrier to keep away those who belong to a different denomination, who differ theologically, a symbol of exclusivism, a privilege for insiders and not the radically inclusive meal that Jesus seems to have had in mind.

The *Christian Century* reported recently on three Seattle clergy, three interfaith amigos: a Christian, Don Mackenzie (a United Church of Christ minister); a rabbi, Ted Falcon; and a Sufi Muslim, Jamal Rahman. They are good friends and host a weekly radio talk show. They plan interfaith events, projects, celebrations, and conversations. They are part of what Harvard

University's Pluralism Project calls a grassroots approach to interfaith relations. Instead of roundtable discussions, more and more Christians, Jews, and Muslims are working together and discovering a unity not based on theological agreement but shared values and hopes and commitments. I couldn't help but think of an interfaith project based on shared values that happened here in Chicago last week. A Greek Orthodox priest sprinkled the Cubs dugout with holy water. And on Friday a group of Muslims gathered outside Wrigley Field to pray for a Cubs win. Obviously it didn't work. Maybe we need a Presbyterian next year.

Here at Fourth Presbyterian Church we are involved with the Downtown Islamic Center. We've enjoyed dinners in each other's buildings, worked together to serve Sunday Night Suppers to the homeless and hungry, and women from the two congregations planned an interfaith prayer service last March and will hold another one. In Seattle, among the three amigos, the boundaries sometimes get blurred, the *Christian Century* reported. Don Mackenzie invited Rachman and Falcon to help serve the elements at a communion service at University Congregational Church. He said it was deeply meaningful, and Rabbi Falcon said later that it felt like being on sacred ground. I had a similar experience, as a guest in the home of Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, a good friend, for a Shabbat meal and celebration. Not everyone is happy with these boundary-crossing events. Letters to the editor of the *Christian Century* lamented "the watering down of the sacrament" when a Muslim and Jew participate and "the failure to focus on Christological distinctions." Not all Christians, after all, believe the same things about what happens at Communion. It's why we think we can't commune together. Roman Catholics believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Some believe Christ is present in the elements, which remain bread and wine, the Presbyterian position. Some believe the elements are symbols of the body and blood. And some believe that what we are doing at Communion is remembering Jesus. These are significant differences—on the basis of which wars have been fought—and Christian leaders have decided that that something sacred would be violated and that it would be wrong to open the door too wide and risk including the other.

Jesus told a story once, about a man who planned a dinner party and whose invited guests all declined, for a variety of not-very-important reasons. Instead of canceling the dinner, the host ordered his servants to go out into the streets and invite people who don't ordinarily get to attend fancy dinner parties: the poor, the blind, the lame. When they all found their way to the table, there was still room, so the host sent the servants out again: "compel people to come," he said, "so that my house may be filled." Matthew tells the same story. In his version, the host tells his servants "invite everyone, the good and the bad." What an amazing idea that is. The banquet table is open. It is not reserved for those who have the correct

beliefs about the food. It is not restricted to those who uphold particular moral standards. It certainly is not restricted to those who espouse a particular ideology or political philosophy. This table, Jesus said, is radically open. All are welcome here. This table, Jesus said, is precisely the place where all the boundaries that divide the human family—race, religion, political affiliation, tribe, geography, gender, sexual orientation, wealth, or poverty—the table is precisely the place where all of that is transcended, where reconciliation actually happens. The point is not to exclude but to include everyone, until God's house is full.

Could it be that for all these years, all these centuries, we've been getting this wrong, that the guest list to the Lord's Table is far more inclusive than anyone ever dared imagine? Black-white, gay-straight, rich-poor, Republican-Democrat, Christian-Jew-Muslim—could it possibly be that Jesus wants everybody to be at the table?

Yale's distinguished scholar of world religion Lamin Sanneh thinks so. Early Christianity, he says, unlike any other religion, "broke out of the confines of geography and race; Christianity was a religion for all seasons, fit for all humanity" (*Disciples of All Nations,* p. 14).

What about those who espouse other faiths? That's the sticking point. Surely Jesus doesn't want them at the table unless, of course, they give up their beliefs and adopt ours.

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, writes, "Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God—in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not my faith, whose truth is not my truth. . . . God is my God," Rabbi Sacks says, but "also the God of all humankind."

And Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary and a member of this congregation, in a superb book, *A Multitude of Blessings*, asks, "Can we affirm faith in Jesus Christ and seek to live according to his teachings and at the same time live with (and respect the faith of) neighbors who are not Christians?" "Yes," she insists, with compelling eloquence. Consider the alternative: the Christian exclusivism that resulted in the marginalization and persecution of the Jews, Crusades to liberate the Holy Land from the Infidel, the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492 and the Inquisition that followed. Surely that's not what Jesus had in mind!

"Why," Cynthia asks, "would a God in whose image all people are created, a God the Bible says, is lover of all creation, devise a plan of salvation that automatically excludes most of the human beings who ever lived?" (p. 13). It is possible, Cynthia maintains, "to affirm the Christian confession that

God has made [himself] uniquely known to humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and at the same time to affirm that the religious diversity of human history is part of God's providential care for all of humankind" (p. 2).

This is not just academic, a discussion among theologians. Scholars of human history, Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng among them, say that peace among nations, peace among cultures, is inconceivable apart from peace among religions, a proposition proved with every suicide bombing, every Taliban assassination, every Jewish settler attack on Palestinian farmers, every incident of Christian arrogance and exclusivism.

There is at the heart of our faith an alternative. The surprising news is that it is not our idea but God's. It is not, as it is sometimes portrayed, a theological sellout, a liberal watering down of the sharp theological edges of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the essence of the gospel. The surprising news is that it is God's idea, God's hope and dream for the human family:

> the table—to which all are invited, that radical, gracious hospitality, right at the center of things, that open-armed welcome to all the children of God to return home—where they belong, where all of us belong, at the table; that beautiful, divine impatience that will not be satisfied until all the barriers and boundaries are gone and all are in and the house of God is full.